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ABSTRACT

Students in Israel who wish to enter institutes of higher education are required to hold a matriculation certificate. Matriculation exams are therefore high-stake and stressful. In 1993 the Ministry of Education appointed a committee to consider reforming the matriculation policy. This paper describes the political and societal aspects of the policy reform--the complexities of translating policy into everyday practice and of resolving contradictory dynamics. Data were gathered through participant observation of committee meetings; interviews with committee members, the Ministry of Education, high-level officials, principals, teachers, parents, and students; and document analysis. The paper focuses on the dependence of systemic reform on the interaction among several antecedent conditions and factors in the policymaking process (time, interactional synchrony, and commitment) and the synergetic effects of different modes of implementation. Although at one point consensus seemed unattainable, the committee engaged in a deliberation process that ended in consensus, reflecting compromise and a practicality ethic. The committee adopted two complementary modes of implementation: (1) the revolutionary mode, in which centralized authority designates a national lottery that decides which three subject areas will not be tested; and (2) the evolutionary mode, in which 22 high schools participate in an ongoing re-ulitation pilot program. (Contains eight references and one figure). (LMI)

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Systemic Reform in National Assessment: The Determination of Policy and its Relation to Practice

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to provide some insights into the complexities of policy making, and the difficulties of implementing this policy in practice, in a specific cultural context. The study illuminates structural change processes at work at the system level. Special attention is paid to the translation of policy into everyday practice.

Schooling is conceived to be governed by political and social forces (Apple 1991) therefore educational reform is viewed in terms of ideological and social struggles taking place "in the context of contradictory economic, political and cultural dynamics" (Ginsburg et al. 1991), leading to a formulation of policy. The process of policy implementation is perceived as reflecting evolution of intentions in a continuum from policy development to practice (Lowham 1995). By evolution of intentions Lowham means the changes in innovations as policy moves among the subsystems of a larger educational system. Lowham (1995) argues that "the adaptation occurs at several levels and becomes evolutionary. Hence, the implemented practice may be only distantly related to the original intention." (p. 113) This process depends on a variety of interacting forces, some supportive and some opposed to the new policy. These

forces might yield a synergetic effect with an enhanced impact on the system (Ben-Peretz 1995). In cases where the interacting forces in the implementation process support each other their combined impact strongly promotes implementation.

This paper is about a policy reform concerning national assessment at the end of senior highschool studies. The political and societal aspects of this policy and its implementation will be analyzed and the details of the processes will be highlighted.

Background

The specific reform treated in this paper concerns a central facet of national assessment in Israel, namely, the matriculation examinations. A matriculation certificate is required in Israel in order to continue one's education in institutes of higher education. Because of this requirement matriculation exams in Israel are high-stake exams creating stress and conflict situations. In 1993 a committee was appointed by the Minister of Education to consider a reform in the matriculation policy.

The committee members represented different stakeholders and interest groups concerning matriculation reform. The appointment of the committee was an expression of an open 'policy window' (Kingdon, 1984). Kingdon defined policy window as pertaining to three streams. The "problem stream" constitutes a set of conditions that are conceived as necessitating remedial actions. The "alternative stream" is a set of proposals for actions that meet certain criteria, such as technical feasibility, value acceptability and reasonable chance for acceptance by officials and public. The third, "political stream" is composed of public mood, pressure groups, and ideological views. In the case of the reform of matriculation exams in Israel all three "streams" linked up

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to open a policy window. Time was ripe for a reform in matriculation policies. The "problem situation, (stream)", was defined in social and pedagogical terms. From a social point of view it was considered unacceptable that only about 40% of a cohort finishing senior high schools in Israel were entitled to a matriculation certificate, though 71% of a cohort finish 12 grades. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that there exist significant gaps between different ethnic groups and socio-economic classes concerning percentages of graduates with matriculation certificates.

From a pedagogical point of view the large amount of time devoted in the last years of senior high schools to preparation for external examinations was considered to deny students opportunities for meaningful and in-depth studies related to their own interests.

The "alternative stream" consisted of a change in school organization policy in Israel favoring decentralization, more school autonomy and school-based curriculum development. This change constituted a basis for viable alternatives for external examinations, such as a reduction in their number, and a shift towards on-going school assessment using a variety of assessment modes.

The "political stream" was expressed in a political climate that was conducive to change. The incoming labor government was interested in promoting education, addressing issues of equity, and the needs of diverse societal sectors. The new Minister of Education pushed toward a reform in matriculation exams, and in higher education, in order to increase the percentage of high school graduates among

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underrepresented societal groups entering tertiary education. Thus, the scene was set for policy reform.

Methods and data sources

The study relied on participant observation of committee meetings and on interviews with members of the committee, the Minister of Education, high-level officials of the Ministry, principals, teachers, parents and students. Documents pertaining to the new policy were analyzed, including the official report of the committee and formal announcements of the Ministry of Education.

The process of policy formulation - the resolving of contradictory dynamics

The opening of a policy window for policy reform did not mean that the process of policy formulation proceeded without contradictory cultural and political dynamics. During the one and a half years of the committee's work contradictory voices were heard and considered in the committee, as well as outside it. Teachers unions, on one hand, and university representatives, on the other hand, were opposed to any change in the existing matriculation policy. Both these organizations carried enormous weight and exercised their power in manifold ways, including the use of media such as newspaper reports, to present their positions.

The main arguments of the representatives of the teacher unions were as follows:

- Reduction in the number of external examinations and their limitation to the main languages: mother tongue, English and math, would create two classes of teachers: those whose subject matter areas are more central and vital to students, and those

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whose subject matter areas don't count, and might be partially eliminated from the school time-table.

- Teachers were accustomed to the fact that external examinations provided a strong motivation for students to study and to cooperate in the teaching-learning situation. They were afraid to lose this support in their daily struggle to induce learning.
- Students of lower ability and motivation would loose the opportunity to balance their final grades in one area by their success in other subject matter areas.

The university representatives, on the other hand, voiced their concern that without external exams in a variety of subjects they would lack a valid, reliable, and equal basis for screening students who wish to enter higher education.

Other members in the committee, who represented minorities, as well as religious and vocational schools, demanded consideration of their respective populations and needs. Moslem members, as well as representatives of Jewish religious schools, insisted that their respective subject areas should be included in the external exams. The syllabus of vocational school includes theoretical and practical subjects, leading to arguments for requiring external exams in both domains.

Some members of the committee, especially educational scholars advocated the complete abolishment of matriculation exams, which they perceived to be counterproductive for meaningful learning experiences.

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Several inherent dilemmas were identified in the deliberations of the committee:

- the dilemma between the intention to give all students a common core of shared cultural knowledge, and the aspiration to serve the heterogeneity of diverse student populations
- the dilemma between the perceived personal and societal needs to promote excellence and the committment to principles of equity, education for all, and social integration
- the dilemma between the inclination to adapt a policy which will ensure school autonomy and the Israeli tradition of a centralized educational system
- the dilemma between a demand for teacher and school accountability and the conception of open school gooals which are not pre-determined by the authorities.

At one point it seemed that there was no way to reach a consensus on recommendations concerning the matriculation reform. What did happen throughout the deliberation process that led finally to consensus (with one dissenting voice), reflecting compromise and a practicality ethic (Doyle and Ponder 1977-78)?

The dynamics of interaction in policy formulation

Several factors in the dynamics of the committee meetings are perceived as having crucial influence on the outcomes of the deliberations.

A most important factor relates to time. Though the letters of appointment of committee members asked them to submit their recommendations to the Minister of Education after four months, the committee continued their joint efforts for a year and a half. This extension of time was deemed necessary for a number of reasons:

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- Appointment of the committee created a flurry of interest among educators and the general public. Many voices demanded to the heard and as a result the committee received many letters and position papers, and interviewed representatives of various interest groups, such as history teachers, parents' groups and others.
- It takes time to create a community collaborating on a joint task. It is a slow move from overt antagonism of participants to a more open-minded and receptive form of stating one's views and concerns. Over time a miraculous transformation took place in the deliberations of the committee, people started to become involved in sincere attempts of coordinating their views, instead of trying to enforce them on each other. Schwab (1978) speaks about the 'pooling of knowledge', he claims that "each specialist must relate his relevant knowledge not only to the problem in hand but to the relevant knowledge of other specialists" (p. 143). This relating one' s knowledge, experience and convictions, to each other was crucial for the formulation of a new assessment policy.

The importance of time and timing relates, as well, to another phenomenon, namely interactional synchrony, the rhythm of social behavior. Kendon (1982) argues that we are seldom aware of the power of synchrony and states that "when we do become aware of the consideration of action between ourselves and our co-interactants, it seems that this can have quite powerful consequences for our feeling for and apprehension of the other." (p. 358) Overtime the committee started to enact such coordination of action, which proved to be highly conducive for the generation of conclusions which were acceptable to all members but one.

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Another component of the process of reaching consensus concerns the expectations that built up within the circle of participants, as well as outside it. Members of the committee were expected by their respective constituencies to reach operational conclusions. In the beginning these conclusions were in stark opposition. Whereas some officials of the Ministry and some professors of education favored complete abolition of external exams, representatives of teacher unions and of universities favored the status quo. But everyone expected some policy recommendations, and as more time passed these expectations were inforced by the Minister of Education, by educators and by the public who voiced their concerns in various ways. The involvement of media and voices of the public, as expressed in letters and personal appearances before the committee, strengthened the urgency of expectations. Members of the committee felt the shared need to reach conclusions, they were committed to closure of their efforts, leading to a defensible set of recommendations.

This commitment was in part due to a fear of having spent a lot of time without showing results, and in part it stemmed from their professional and political obligations.

It was interesting to follow the tranformation of antagonists into a community with a shared purpose, a common language, collective experiences and a growing sense of belonging. Over time, some coordination of knowledge, experience and convictions, led to a measure of compromise and finally to consensus concerning the recommendations for a new matriculation policy.

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Some characteristics of the new policy

The new assessment policy is an expression of an ideological and practical compromise. The overall number of subjects to be included in the matriculation certificate was not reduced, but part of the assessment was transfered to the control of schools. The number and nature of subject areas was adapted to specific student populations and school systems (minorities, religious, vocational).

The ideological compromise could come about when the advocates of complete abolishment of external exams came to see the point of teachers who were afraid to teach without the support of the extrinsic motivation to learn imposed by exams. The representatives of teachers, on the other hand, became sensitive to the arguments for reducing the time spent on preparation for exams, as well as the accompanying stress. Representatives of the universities acknowledged the needs of students and the desire of schools to become autonomous, and agreed to transfer part of summative evaluation of students to their schools. The practical compromise was that though the overall number of assessed subjects did not change, conditions of testing would be changed so that overtime assessment would become school-based, starting with three out of seven obligatory subjects.

An important aspect of the new policy was the modular format of exams. Before the reform students could choose the level of their studies in the diverse subject areas. Once they had chosen, or been advised by their teachers, to choose a basic level, and wished to move to a higher level later on, they had to start the examinations all over again at the new level. The reform changed this pattern, three levels of studies were

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to be determined in each subject, basic, regular and advanced. Students who passed exams at one level would be able to move to higher levels by adding certain components to the curriculum and by passing an additional exam on these components. The goal of this change is to enable weaker students to gain knowledge and confidence in their abilities thus increasing the percentage of students who are eligible for a matriculation certificate and for higher education. Once the new matriculation policy was approved by the Minister of Education, and by all relevant authorities, there arose the problem of implementation.

Implementation strategies

Two main modes of implementation of the reform were adopted, complementing each other. The first might be called the revolutionary mode, based on the authority and power of the Minister of Education in a centralized school system. After receiving the recommendations of the committee, and adopting them officially, the Minister decided that no external exams would be held in three subject areas to be identified each year through a lottery. In these subjects the students' grades are to be school-based. Thus, in one stroke the burden of external exams was lifted somewhat without creating a status difference between the various subjects. The lottery was scheduled to take place toward the end of the last year of high school. It determines which subjects are to be exempt of external exams. In these subjects school-based grades are noted on the matriculation certificate. Up to the time of the lottery students study all subjects, and none is neglected or downgraded.

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The second mode might be called the evolutionary mode of implementation. This is a slow process of working with, and in schools, searching for ways to improve school-based assessment. Simultaneously new curricula have to be developed which match the modular nature of testing. Ongoing consultations with university leaders, with educators and parents are needed in order to ensure the continuation of this process and to appease any opponents. The evolutionary mode of implementing the new matriculation policy in Israel is in the form of an intervention project in twenty two high schools. These highschools were carefully selected so as to represent different regions in the country, different segments of society, different ethnic and religious groups, and different school systems - academic and vocational. In each school, one to three subjects were chosen for school-based development and assessment. Collaborative teacher teams were set up for every subject and special in-service programs were initiated. The teachers learned to use divergent modes of student assessment, and students became more involved in their learning process. The twenty two schools project will be carried on for several years, new schools will join the project from time to time, and serve as models for system-wide implementation of the matriculation reform policy. It has to be borne in mind, though, that the actual interpretation of the new policy, will vary in different schools according to the specific content and situation, and will reflect an evolution of intentions and different emphasis on the various components of the new policy.

The combination of the revolutionary and evolutionary modes of implementation might be viewed as an example of the practicality ethic at work (Doyle and Ponder 1977-8). Without a radical and powerful Ministerial decree the reform could have bogged down in endless small difficulties and beaurocratic barriers. But the one-time decision could

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become meaningless, and even self-defeating, without the ongoing evolution of intentions in a continuum from policy development to practice (Lowham 1995), through patient and painstaking work with principals and teachers in schools based on their own perception of the reform. Moreover, the implementation modes adopted in the Israeli case of assessment policy reform allow for synergy of diverse forces to interact and to enhance the power of each. Through the conjuction of Ministerial support for the reform and the reduction of external exams , on one hand, and grassroot work towards school-based assessment, on the other hand, the whole process was enhanced and implementation was energized, activated, and intensified. Each of the modes of implementation served to enhance the other.

Concluding comments

This paper described and analyzed a case of systemic reform, emphasizing its dependence on the interaction of several antecedent conditions on a number of factors in the policy-making process, and on the synergetic effects of different modes of implementation. The process of implementation is accompanied by local adaptations and evolution of intentions. Thus, in some cases the emphasis may be on school-based curriculum development in preparation for school-based assessment. In other cases the emphasis may be on student involvement in the actual assessment process.

The following chart illustrates these processes, and the relation of policy decisions to educational practice.

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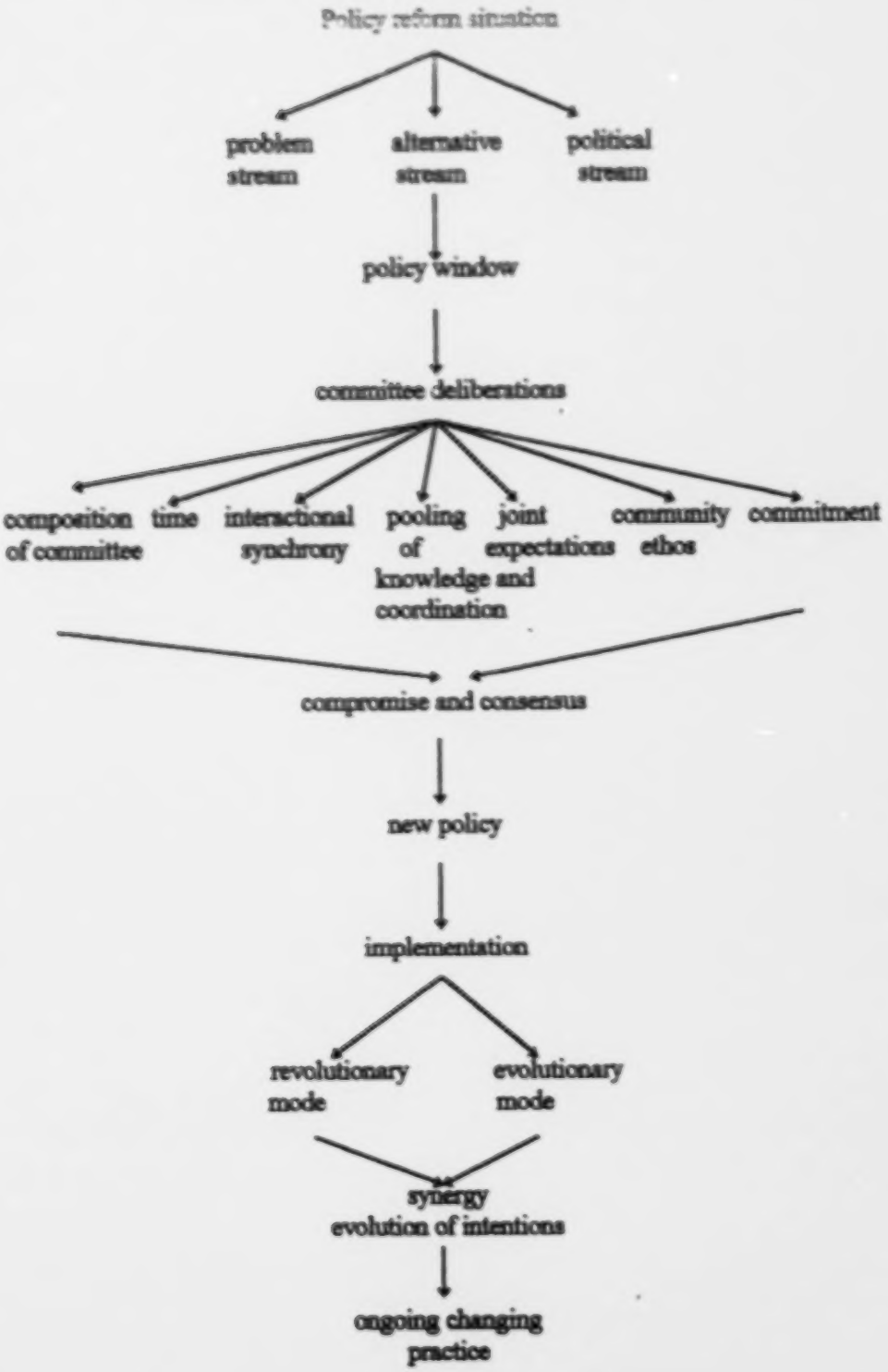
Fig. 1: From policy making to educational practice



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